
**Buddhist Votive Stupās as Bridges between Monastic and Non-Monastic Communities
in the Lower Ganga Basin****Surajit Das**Link : https://santiniketansahityapath.org.in/wp-content/uploads/2026/01/4_Surajit-Das.pdf

Abstract: In the Buddhist tradition, votive stupās are deeply significant both religiously and culturally as small monuments. These votive stupas, situated in the lower Ganges Valley and regarded as the epicentre of Buddhist activity from the Mauryan to the Pala eras, have served as a crucial conduit between the monastic community and general devotees. The votive stupas at notable Buddhist sites, such as Nalanda, Mahasthangarh, Karnasubarna, and Jagjivanpur, served as symbols of devotion, means of achieving virtue, and places of religious harmony. For the monastic community, these were places of meditation, religious education, and the preservation of sacred relics. On the other hand, for ordinary devotees, these stupās provided a means of staying connected with Buddhism, an opportunity to attain virtue and religious patronage. The devotional stupās served as a bridge between the holy and the domestic worlds, as demonstrated in this study through an analysis of their artwork, inscriptions, and architectural design. Donor writings demonstrate how lay devotees and monastics came to work together, with laymen offering resources and monks offering spiritual direction.

Key words: votive stupā, Buddhism, monastic communities, non-monastic communities, spiritual bridges, patronage.

Introduction:

Buddhist art and architecture holds a distinct position in India's vast and varied art heritage. Art has spread based on religious ideas in nearly every corner of the world. This is also true of Buddhism. Buddhist art not only reflects religious concepts and beliefs but also plays a vital part in Indian society's traditions, culture, and thought processes. The Lower Gangetic plains were important Buddhist ecclesiastical and cultural centers in ancient India. Buddhist statues, viharas, and stupās are among the Buddhist archaeological artifacts found in the area that bear witness to the spread and expansion of Buddhism. Famous ancient Buddhist centers include Nalamda, Vikramshila, Moghalmari, Karnasubarna, Jagjivanpur, and Bharatpur. At these locations, stupā and vihara ruins have been discovered, illustrating the growth and evolution of Mahāyāna and Hīnayāna Buddhism. Among the archaeological artifacts discovered in this area, the votive Stupās are significant. In addition to testifying to religious practices, this article provides a thorough examination of construction styles, religious motives, and social influences in the lower Ganges valley.

Area of Study:

This essay will examine and recreate the development of Buddhism in the lower Gangetic basin. The upper, middle, and lower Gangetic plains are the three common divisions of the Gangetic plains. The current study focuses on the early-to-early medieval era of the Lower Gangetic Valley. Of the three Ganga plains, the lower Gangetic plain is the biggest.

Buddhist Votive Stupās

According to SM Ali, it began on the west side of Patna, where the Sone River meets the Ganges, and proceeded across the state of Bihar, following the top of the Hazaribagh Plateau, passing along the present-day southwest border of West Bengal, and ending at the Bay of Bengal.¹ So, it means the area of study is the southern part of Bihar, the whole of West Bengal, excluding the Purulia district and the mountainous regions of the Darjeeling district, and some parts of Bangladesh.

Methodology:

Following an archaeological study of Buddhist stupas, particularly an extensive review of the existing literature on cultural and religious aspects of Buddhist votive stupas in the lower Ganges basin, several identifiable gaps emerge that could contribute to the research. To fill that void, the study focused primarily on archaeological sites, including find sites. During the field survey, I got submission stacks from different archaeological sites in the region, that is, from the report site and the unreported site. However, some basic things have been followed during the field survey to document the artifacts of the offering stupa. The sociocultural context was examined to understand the factors influencing the construction and use of devotional stupas, as well as potential sites for archaeological exploration, based on historical records, existing literature, and consultations with experts. Field surveys were conducted to document and assess the presence of Buddhist stupas at selected sites.

objectives:

1. To analyse the role of votive stupas in mediating rituals between Buddhist monastic centres and their non-monastic devotees during the early medieval period.
2. How these votive objects serve as archaeological evidence of pilgrimage activities to Buddhist religious centres in Bihar and Bengal.
3. To comprehend how the devotional activities, beliefs, and goals of non-monastic devotees are embodied in votive artifacts.
4. To examine the cultural and socioeconomic settings in which votive artifacts are made, distributed, and dedicated, with an emphasis on the people who helped create them.

Stupās are the oldest examples of Buddhist architecture. The Sanskrit word ‘stupā’ is ‘group’ in Pali which etymologically means a pile or mound or an artificial small hill.² A monument usually built at a pyre or cremation site is called a Stupā. The Stupā, built with the remains of the Buddha after his Mahaparinirvana, is considered the starting point of Buddhist art. The most notable stūpas contain the relics of the Buddha or one of his followers and were built at sites commemorating important events in the Buddha's life.³ Buddhist stupās are mainly divided into four categories- (1) Saririka Stupa Stupā, (2) Parbhogik Stupā, (3) Uddeshika Stupa Stupā, and (4) Votive or Offering Stupā.⁴ The stupā built on the cremation or remains of the four great men, namely Tathagata Buddha, Paccheka Buddha, Sravaka Buddha, and Chakravarti Raja, is called the ‘Physical’ stupā. A stupā built on items used by the Tathagata Buddha, such as a begging bowl, etc., is called a ‘Paribhogika’ stupā. Nirmitta Stupās are called ‘objective’ Stupās, centered around the places where important chapters of the Buddha's life were organized. Pilgrims or pilgrims also build numerous small stupās, called ‘Naivedya’ stupās, to gain merit while visiting holy places.

In the lower Gangetic valley, numerous portable offering mounds have been discovered, which are made of brick, bronze, stone, and clay. However, offering piles made of clay were again found in both burnt and unburnt conditions. Although the practice of stupā architecture dates back to the pre-Buddhist era, the unique feature of Buddhist stupā was the practice of stupā-centred worship. Before the Buddha statue was built in the first century of Christ, the presence of the Buddha was expressed through the stupā, and the stupā worship was considered as Buddha worship.⁵

According to the Vinaya sutra, the Buddhists promoted public involvement in the construction and worship of stupās to engage the general population in religious activities. In actuality, the Pali literature Mahavastu, written by Theravadis, represents a shift to Mahayana as it incorporates the Buddha notion that is common among Mahasanghikas and Lokottaravadis. According to the Mahavastu, even strolling around a stupā and offering it presents of flowers and other offerings will gain one boundless merit.⁶

Archaeological Sites:

Nalanda

There is a fair amount of evidence for the devotion of votive stūpas at Nālandā, but far more than at any other early medieval Bengali or Bihari monastic institution. Let's take a brief glance at the main monuments' spatial alignment before examining the alignment of votive stūpas in the monastic site's religious area. That will give the background information needed to comprehend how the votive stūpas align. According to the information available, this place consistently received a significant amount of votive stūpas. This is demonstrated by the fact that the court's level gradually climbed as the main monument's size increased with each addition, and several small votive stūpas were found in various locations entirely or partially buried beneath the various visible floors and walls.⁷

Evidence of devotional stupa donation can be found not only in the vicinity of the main monument but also in the vicinity of a subsidiary temple, the temple of Avalokiteshvara, located in the northeast corner of the main monument.⁸ None of the devotional stupas described around the site are inscribed with the donor's name, so it is difficult to determine whether they were only donated by non-monastic devotees or if some monks were also involved in the process.

Vikramshila

In front of the main gate, towards the north of this monastery, we found a votive stūpa complex. 150 votive stūpas were located on either side of the passage leading to the main gate. These were constructed in different phases as revealed by the two floorings on which they were built. The votive stūpas is made of bricks or stone. The brick stūpas, in some cases, were found plastered with lime. In this monastery, there are 110 brick stūpas and 40 stone stūpas. Buddha in a thousand forms was located on the ground. These stūpas are either circular or rectangular in plan. The medium size brick-built votive stūpas is 2.8m in height. Some stone votive stūpas have been found with one-line inscriptions relating to the Buddhist creed.

Moghamari

Moghamari is a village located about 5.2 kilometres north of Dantan city on the left bank

of the Subarnarekha River in the district of West Medinipur. Three circular Buddhist stūpas made of bricks, measuring 2.80m, 2m, and 1.25m in diameter, were found here. Five such small stūpas have been found, which attest to the fact that the main stūpas must have been there somewhere in the vicinity.¹⁰ During the 3rd phase of excavation, the discovery of a circular brick stūpas at the eastern part of the mound indicates that this religious complex was possibly a Buddhist one.¹¹

Jagjivanpur, Malda district

The Nandadīrghikā-Udrāṅga Mahāvihāra is situated in the village of Jagjivanpur and is a monocultural site dated back to the 9th century CE. This small village is situated on the banks of the River Punarbhava in the Habibpur Block of Malda District, West Bengal. One votive stūpa, now preserved in the State Archaeological Museum, Behala, West Bengal, had been excavated here. It was discovered in this monastery during the excavation. This votive stūpa is made of mud. This round-based votive stūpa is one foot.¹²

Raktamṛttikā Mahāvihāra

Huien Tsang, the Chinese traveler of the seventh century A.D., referred to the monastery 'Lo-to-wei-chi' (Raktamṛttikā) situated by the side of the capital 'Kie-Lo-Na-Su-Fa-La-Na' (Karnasubarna),¹³ an important center of learning for Vajrayana Buddhists near Karnasubarna. The site was first excavated in 1962 by a team from the Department of Archaeology of Calcutta University under the direction of SR. Das. During the excavation, some votive Stūpas were found. But those tablets are preserved in the Ashutosh Museum.

Chandraketugarh, Berachampa, North 24 Parganas

Chandraketugarh is located in West Bengal State's North 24 Parganas district. It is an ancient city of Bengal situated along the Bidyadhari River, at a distance of 10km from the northern part of the river. Excavation at this site further points out the remains of two votive stūpas, and an extensive brick-built wall, possibly hinting at a Buddhist establishment's existence in the later Gupta period, and it is now kept in the Ashutosh Museum.¹⁴ Some significant terracotta findings from this site include a circular seal depicting a Torana or gateway with a peacock standing on it, and a plaque depicting a cylindrical stūpa-like architrave.

Baishata

Baishata is a village under the jurisdiction of the Jaynagar Majilpur police station in the Jaynagar II CD block of the South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. A votive Stūpa from Baishata shows four major incidents of Buddha's life. Four images of Buddha are carved in the four different niches of the stūpa in Vitarka mudrā, dharmacakrapravartana mudrā, bhūmisparśa mudrā and padmāsana with mango in his hand.¹⁵ It is dated between the last part of the 7th century and the first half of the 8th century C.E. It is now preserved in the 'Pratnatattvik Kalidas Dutta Sangrahasala' (Jayanagar).

Bahulara

Bahulara is a small village in the Bakura district of West Bengal. Some small brick stūpas belonging maybe to the 10th-12th century C.E. were discovered here.¹⁶

Malda

An ancient stone was dug out while digging the ground for building construction at the Malda Court premises. It was a triangular-shaped stone cut around the design with small holes on the head. This stone is actually a votive pile. A Buddha Vihara has been

discovered at Jagjivanpur village in Malda. Hence, the recovery of Buddhist votive piles can be connected to the Vihara.

Jiagan

There is only one votive stūpa at the museum. It is made of sandstone. The approximate height of the stūpa will be 15 to 18 cm. According to the museum curator, this stūpa was recovered from the surrounding area. Its date is estimated between the 11th - 12th centuries. No oblation stūpa from Karṇasubārṇa is found here, but there are artifacts and sculptures from Karṇasubārṇa.¹⁷

Conclusion

There are some fundamental differences in the pattern of votive stupās with religious monuments between Bihar and Bengal in the lower Ganges valley. In various monasteries in the Bihar region, donors have erected piles of stone, terracotta or sun-baked clay. Similarly, in various parts of Bengal, the piles found were mostly of terracotta and brick, and in some places of stone.

The most sacred places located in the inner part of the Mahavihara were available for offering stupās to non-monastic devotees. These devotional stupās were, in other words, part of the monastic fabric, whereas the Sangha did not permit the dedication of devotional stupās near the central cruciform temple or near the outer walls of the temple. The monastic enclosure testifies to the willingness and enthusiasm of the monastic authorities of Nalanda to engage in rituals with their non-monastic devotees.

In Antichok, no votive heaps were reported from the area surrounded by monastic cells. They, rather, are found outside the northern gate of the monastery. There, too, a separate area was demarcated by an enclosure wall with a gate for the offering of devotional stupās by non-Bhikkhu devotees.¹⁸ The monasteries found in the lower Ganges sub-continent had less ritualistic interface with non-monk non-noble devotees. The patronage provided by the pilgrims seems to have made their wealth their main element.

The published epigraphic data relating to the Buddhist monastic centers in the Lower Ganges valley, dating back to the early medieval period, can be used to deduce that the patronage of monasteries in this early medieval region was mainly done by the Samantas (subordinate rulers) who were associated with religious activities.¹⁹ The state's own authority and occupation of the donated land and the kings, who hoped to use some of the political and religious symbols radiated by some monasteries for their own benefit. Non-noble devotees had little interest in patronizing these monasteries or were not allowed to do so. In the early Middle Ages, Buddhist monastic centers were reluctant to invite patronage from non-monastic non-noble devotees. This is because a general lack of carved sculptures is seen in the religious sites of such monasteries by such devotees.

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Votive Stupa Complex at Vikramshila



Votive Stupa Complex at Nalanda

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